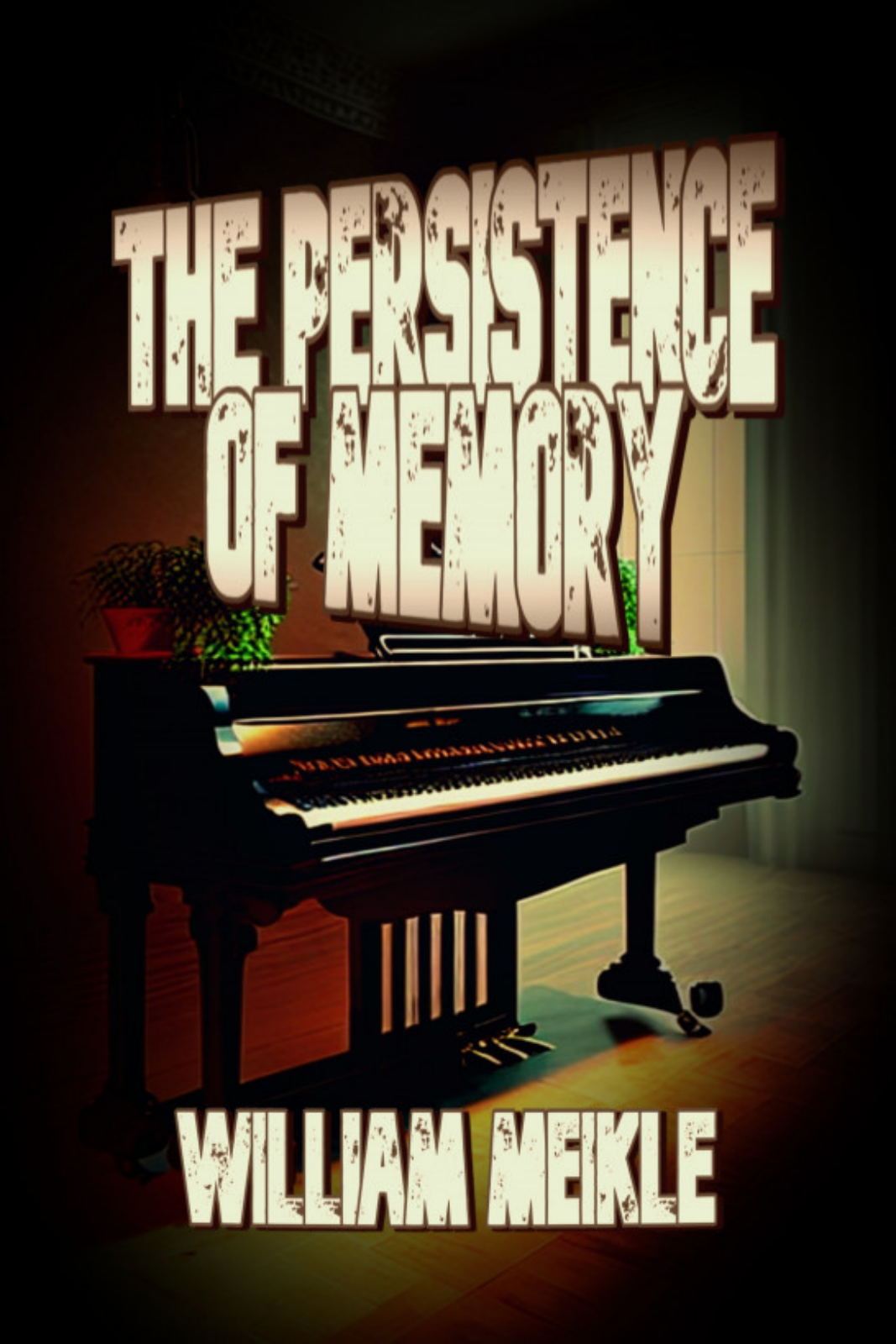
THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY



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The Persistence of Memory
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Betty woke with a start, heart pounding so loud in her ears that it took several seconds to realize a different sound had brought her so rudely awake; someone was playing the piano in the dining room beneath her.

She sat up in bed, gasping for breath, adrenaline jolting through her like fire.

George?

It couldn't be her husband, for he had been dead these three years now. But whoever was downstairs knew exactly what to play to get her heart racing; the old songs from when the sun shone and life was good.

I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places.

Her heart refused to slow. The playing reached a crescendo for a final chorus and sent vibrations all through the old house, dust mites bouncing on the floorboards. The last chord rang and echoed in the still night. Then everything was quiet.

Betty stayed sitting upright in bed, straining to hear any sound of movement from below, waiting for the scrape as whoever had been playing stood from the piano stool. But there was nothing, just her heavy breathing that slowly returned to something approaching normal. She would not get any further sleep; that was for sure. She stepped out of bed, wincing at the cold that seeped from the floorboards, and pulled on her old dressing gown. When she got to her bedroom door she stood still for a while, listening, hearing only the slight rush of wind from outside and the far off sound of a car on the main road. She was already starting to dismiss the piano playing as the last remnants of a dream.

What else could it be?

That feeling was reinforced when she went downstairs, turning on the lights as she went. The dining room was empty. She thought of shouting out, but stifled the urge, aware of the stupidity of the thought.

What would I do if someone answered?

She checked the front door; it was still securely locked. By this time she felt completely awake and knew from long years of experience that going back to bed now would only mean a night spent staring at shadows waltzing on the ceiling and shedding bitter tears at a love lost. Instead she made for the kitchen. There was a moment when an injudicious step on a loose floorboard brought a chime from the piano and a lurch in her stomach, but the small domestic acts of making a pot of tea soon calmed her. She turned on the radio -- tuned permanently to a news station to avoid any chance of hearing the old songs, and let the soft bass voice of the reporter wash over her.

There was a nice comfortable armchair in the sitting room but she stayed at the kitchen table – the chair was too close to the piano, and she wasn't ready for that.

Not yet.

She poured two cups of tea; a habit even death hadn't broken, and sat for a while thinking. As always, the memories were never far away.

~-o0O0o-~

It had been summer when they met; one of those gray years there seemed to be a lot of in the aftermath of the war. If you believed the movies the world was full of girls jiving and young men rebelling, but if George was a rebel he hid it well. Fifty-six it was, and they were both eighteen. Being in a bar was a bit of an adventure for Betty; she was on her first holiday without her parents, just her and two friends, in Blackpool for a bit of fun. She realized almost immediately that her idea of fun differed from most of the other people present. They seemed more concerned with getting drunk quickly than having any actual enjoyment. Her two friends were joining in with abandonment, and Betty felt lost, sitting there nursing a half of lager and blackcurrant. She was just considering leaving them to it and heading back to their lodgings when she saw the piano-player looking straight at her. He looked far too young to be even inside a bar; fresh faced with ruddy cheeks and an impish grin that showed crooked front teeth. He winked at Betty and, fingers stroking the piano softly, broke into Moonlight and Roses, all the while never taking his eyes from hers.

And that was it for her. Fifty-five years later she still loved him and still felt his loss every day like a hole in her heart.

Stroke was too small a word for the thing that had happened to her man. One second he was sitting at the piano, playing 'You are my sunshine', with Betty in the kitchen singing along. Suddenly the chords became raucous, dissonant and she heard what seemed to be manic drumming which, to her horror, turned out to be George's feet pounding on the floorboards as his body went into spasm. She had run forward, hands outstretched, just as George fell from the stool. He looked straight at her, his left eye filled with blood. Then, with a noise she would hear forever, his head struck the keys with a ringing, minor chord and he fell at the foot of the piano, dead before he hit the floor.

For months after that she would spend hours sitting on that same stool, running her hand across the keys, just remembering. Jessie Waite used to come by to see her in those days, before she too succumbed to age, and the conversation was always the same.

"I don't know why you keep that thing. It would remind me too much of him."

Bettie never did say why she kept the piano. In truth it did remind her too much, for often in her mind she would see that blood-filled eye, and hear the chord as George's head hit the keyboard. But more often still she would remember him winking at her, and the old songs would come back to her from happier times.

I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places.

She came back to the present to find two cold cups of tea on the table and hot tears running down her cheeks. The radio reminded her that she now lived in a world she barely understood, full of texting, twittering and cell phones. She longed for simpler days but if there was one thing that George's passing had taught her, it was that wishing something were true didn't make it so. She stood from the table, wincing at a stabbing pain in her left hip. Sciatica the doctor's said – just another word that meant she was getting too old for this life. Limping slightly she headed through to the main living area. She'd left the light on in the sitting room, but the dining room, and

the piano, lay in dark shadows beyond that. She'd lived in this house for enough years to know its moods; and long enough to know when something was hinky. That was one of George's words; he'd got it from an old movie or TV show and it had stuck, like a broken record, in his daily conversations. But for this time, on this night, it was just the right word. The shadows that flowed over and around the piano were most definitely hinky.

Suddenly she knew what, or rather who was there.

George?

The piano vibrated, sending out a deep bass chord that rumbled through the floorboards to her feet and sent a delicious shiver all the way up her spine.

"Is that you George?"

But as quick as it had come the feeling passed. The floor was once more cold underfoot and the shadows were just shadows. She walked over towards the instrument, hope and fear and wonder all equally present in her. She knew of old that when George sat there and played the keys would feel slightly warm to the touch afterwards. She reached down, tentatively and stroked the ivory, tears coming as she felt the faintest touch of heat at her fingertips.

George?

There was no further reply, and although she sat on the stool for the remainder of the night despite a growing throb in her hip, she was still alone when morning sunlight started to filter through the curtains. But she had a smile on her face as she moved to the old armchair in the sitting room for a nap. He had given her a sign.

My George is still here -- in all the old familiar places.

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She woke around noon, feeling strangely refreshed, the pain in her hip all but forgotten. For the first time in a while, maybe even since George passed, she had a purpose. Her first port of call was to the local library. If the young girl at the desk had any queries about Betty's change of reading material away from her romantic thrillers, she didn't show it, merely stamped the books with her usual blank stare. It was obvious that the books were not the most popular; Communing with the Dead hadn't been taken out for nearly five years, and Interviews From Beyond the Veil had never left the library since the date it was stamped, some eight years previously. But Betty almost burst into a run in her haste to get the rest of her chores done. There was a trail to follow; one that led to old songs and happier times, and she couldn't wait to get started. She made a perfunctory trip to the grocer's – milk, butter, bread and jam; about all she ate these days, then walked quickly home. If the strain hurt her hip more than was good for her she chose to ignore it and just walked faster, hurrying back to the piano – and to George.

She made herself a perfunctory snack, brewed a fresh pot of tea and then settled down in the sitting room chair to her reading. At the beginning she would look up every so often towards the piano, expecting the shadows to thicken and flow; or the instrument itself to sound out a message. But after a while she got lost in the books, transported to places where ghosts were real, where the dead were

given voice – a place called hope.

She started with the thinner tome, Communing with the Dead. It began well enough, with several case studies based on people who talked to their lost ones; or rather, claimed to talk to their loved ones. For as she read, Betty came to the realization that she didn't believe a word of it; none of the cases had the clear ring of truth, none gave her the frisson up and down her spine she had felt coming through the floorboards. She started skipping pages, only stopping when she came to the second half; a set of practical instructions and visualization exercises for inducing contact. She skim read that part, promising herself that she would come back to it later if the second book did not satisfy.

Not only did it not satisfy, it almost ended up being thrown into a corner. It was full of what George would have called tripe; stories of going into the light, and green fields where choirs of angels sang, everybody was happy and no one ever had a stroke – or played the piano.

Even as that thought struck her the piano gave out a small bass drone. It might only have been the passing of a lorry on the main road, but Betty smiled anyway. Her George always knew what she was thinking.

She put her head back and closed her eyes, and as always the memories welled up. She'd become used to forcing them away, knowing that they would only bring tears, but this time she let them come, let them flood into her, a reminder of sunshine, ice cream cones – and an antique shop in Whitby more than forty years earlier.

~-o0O0o-~

It is their tenth wedding anniversary. The years have been kind in many ways -- but cruel in others. The child they longed for so much had not come, and a woman's problems operation meant that the chances of Betty conceiving were increasingly slim. She was now reconciled to it; it had taken many long nights crying softly into her pillow, trying not to wake George, but finally, although she would always feel empty, she stopped grieving.

George however took the problem as a sign that life was too short to waste. The Whitby holiday was his idea.

"Just the two of us. Fish and chips, mushy peas, a few pints and a sing-song like the old days," he had said. Betty wasn't sure it was a good idea, but anything that made George happy was all right by her.

So here they are, strolling arm in arm in the narrow streets of Whitby. George slurps noisily on an ice-cream coronet, dribbling it down his waistcoat and leaving a long smear when he tries awkwardly to wipe it without letting go of Betty's arm. She is about to admonish him; to remind him of which of them actually does the clothes washing, when she notices his gaze is elsewhere, fixed on the window of an antique shop across the road. She has seen that look before. Last time it had been across a crowded bar. This time there is no accompanying smile or cheeky wink, but she knows what she sees.

Love at first sight.

George almost drags her across the road and into the shop. He ignores the shop assistant and takes her straight over to an old piano

in the window.

"Just look at it sweetheart. It's perfect."

To Betty's eyes it is just an old piano, and a battered one at that, but George has already sat down and started to play.

Roll out the barrel. Let's have a barrel of fun.

She knows already that they will be buying the instrument, despite the fact it will cost a month's wages that they can ill afford to spend. The shop assistant is telling them the story; of wood taken from a shipwreck in the bay seventy years before, of a local craftsman so obsessed that he almost died in the making of it. George hears none of it, lost in rapt smiles as he plays and the assistant tells of the previous owner, a songwriter of some genius that Betty has never heard of.

They leave the shop ten minutes later having arranged payment and delivery, and George speaks of little else for the rest of the holiday but the piano, and the old songs.

~-o0O0o-~

She woke, stiff-necked and chilled, in a dark room. She stretched out a hand to switch on the lamp beside her chair and stopped; the shadows shifted over in the dining room and the air suddenly felt heavy, her breathing becoming rapid and labored.

George?

The piano rang, just once.

Betty got shakily to her feet and made her way to the instrument. She ran her hand along its side, feeling the roughness of the grain at her fingertips.

Ship's timbers. I should have remembered that.

The shadows darkened further and the piano thrummed. She thought her heart might stop as the first four bars of a song echoed loudly around her.

Roll out the barrel. Let's have a barrel of fun.

She sat at the stool, hand just brushing the keys, unsure whether she was playing them, or they were playing her, and not caring in either case. For a minute that felt like an hour she played along with George once more, just like old times.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the shadow lifted and the room fell quiet.

She sat there for a while longer until her tears subsided then went to the kitchen, returning some minutes later with tea and a sandwich. She ate with one hand and held the book in the other, opening Communing with the Dead at the section on practical instructions.

Those that have passed beyond often find themselves lonely, wishing to make contact with the living. There is often something; a person or a well loved trinket or belonging that draws them back to this plane, keeps them returning in search of old memories, of happy times. If you wish to make contact with a returning spirit, you should stay close to the thing they loved most, become attached to it, and make it as much a part of your life as it was theirs. If you can bear it, talk to your lost one, as if they were present with you. And if you persevere, you will often be rewarded with an answer.

She almost threw the book away to join the other.

I've done that bit.

She persevered with it, reading ever more frustrating entries about using ouija boards or pendulums, and instructions about how to hold a séance. She wondered how the writer would feel knowing that Betty needed none of those things, just a piano, and her love?

In the end the books told her nothing she needed. She went and sat on the piano stool again, staying there even as cold seeped into her bones, but although the shadows quivered and the piano occasionally gave out a low vibration, George did not come back that night. In the morning she could not be bothered to climb the stairs to the bedroom and again fell asleep in the old armchair, only waking at dusk.

That became the new pattern of her life, her daylight hours spent wishing away the time until night would come and the piano would sing for her. It was only for a minute or so every night, and afterwards she always cried fresh tears, but she hadn't felt so close to her George since his death.

She took to stroking the piano as if its coarse timber were somehow part of George himself, and it seemed to respond in kind, sending tingling vibrations running through her body. In the depth of the dark nights she sang the old songs, her feet tapping a rhythm on the floorboards and the piano humming in time.

I'm close. But not close enough.

It was as if George was almost in touching distance, and her frustration at not being able to break through the veil between them was growing with each night that passed. She wanted more. She needed more.

~-o0O0o-~

One morning, some two weeks after George had first played for her, she came to a decision. She'd heard of it being done; seen it happen in those old horror movies that George had loved so much. If he was close enough to play the piano, then maybe, just maybe, he was close enough to be brought back completely. One thing was for sure; she wasn't about to find what she needed in the books she'd got from the library, nor in any of the volumes on the shelves that she'd perused on her visit. Her current plan called for something more esoteric.

That afternoon she booked an hour on the computer in the library. Technology had moved on a bit since she retired from the County Council typing pool some twenty years before, but the keyboard was still in the same format, and she took to the operation of a mouse quickly enough when shown the basics. Ten minutes later she was surfing.

A silver surfer she thought, and almost giggled, but that might have been too much for the young librarian to take. Betty had seen the looks.

The youngster thinks I'm crazy. And maybe I am at that – crazy like a fox.

She settled down to searching for what she was after, sifting through a great deal of obvious tripe and much that was hinky. It felt like George was at her shoulder the whole time, whispering in her ear. Her free hand stroked the wood of the table as she surfed, and in her head she heard the piano ring, ever louder as she got closer to her

goal.

The song in her head reached a crescendo as she reached a page deep in a history of alchemical text. The Concordances of the Twelve Serpents.

Ye Twelve Concordances of ye Red Serpent. In wch is succinctly and methodically handled, ae mefhod for ye reffurection of ye recently dead; and, the better to attaine to the originall and true meanes of perfection, inriched with Figures representing the proper colours to lyfe as they successively appere in the practise of this blessed worke.

There were many legends associated with the book, but the thing that drew her to it most was the illustrations, and one in particular. CALX was the heading. The picture showed a young man, bound to a mast of a burning ship. He was smiling.

He had George's face.

Accompanying the illustration was a set of precise instructions. It took her the rest of the hour to copy them down to a notepad in her firm precise handwriting, but she was singing inside as she left the library.

~-o0O0o-~

Sourcing the ingredients proved to be a problem. Mementoes of the deceased were the easy part; procuring the hand of a dead murderer proved more difficult.

But not impossible.

It seemed that anything was available, for a price. It cost her almost all of their savings, and when it was delivered she took one look at it then hid it away until she needed it. The scented candles were likewise exotic, but she finally tracked them down in an Asian shop in Barnsley. The last thing to arrive was the Holy Water from Rome. Neither George nor Betty had ever taken much time for religion, and certainly not the Roman variety, but the recipe in the book called for it, and Betty always followed recipes.

Her frustration grew while waiting for all the ingredients to finally arrive, but it seemed that the piano – George – knew what she planned. Every night it played a gentle, almost funereal song, just twelve bars but enough that Betty knew she was doing the right thing. She spent the nights memorizing the words and actions she was going to need when the time came. That was something she knew how to do. It was almost like doing her multiplication tables back in school, with the same sing-song chanting rhythm to it. But this had a far more different purpose.

On the day the Holy Water arrived the piano had been thrumming almost constantly in anticipation, Betty's stomach roiling and seething in time.

"The wood remembers," George would have said. He often spoke of how sometimes it felt like the piano played from memory. That thought brought fresh tears again.

Tonight. I will do it tonight.

~-o0O0o-~

The preparations did not take long. She started by drawing a

circle of chalk, taking care never to smudge the line as she navigated her way around the piano. Beyond this she rubbed a broken garlic clove in a second circle around the first.

When this was done, she took the small jar of Holy Water and went round the circle again just inside the line of chalk, leaving a wet trail that dried quickly behind her. Within this inner circle she made her pentacle using the signs laid out in The Concordances, and joined each sign most carefully to the edges of the lines she had already made. This proved trickier than she'd thought it would be due to having to plan around the legs of the piano, and it involved more scrambling around on the hard floor than was good for her bad hip. But finally the pentacle was done and she was able to stand.

The rest of it went slower as every muscle in her body was telling her she needed to rest.

I'll do that later. When George is back.

In the points of the pentacle she placed five portions of bread wrapped in linen, and in the valleys five of the scented candles. Finally came the part she'd been dreading. She removed the withered hand from its wrapping and, trying not to look too closely, placed it on the lid of the piano.

I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be.

She raised her voice and started the chant she'd learned earlier. The piano thrummed in sympathy.

Kerub impero tibi per Adam

Aquila impero tibi per alas Tauri.

Serpens impero tibi per Angelum et Leonem.

The walls of the dining room seemed to beat and pulse, as in time with a giant heart. Overhead she heard the sound of rapid movement, footsteps fading in the distance as if something had just run across the room upstairs. She caught a movement at the corner of her eye and turned just as dark shadows slithered from the piano and began to make their way towards her.

She raised her voice to a loud shout, and started to stamp her feet in time. The piano responded by ringing with each stamp.

Ri linn dioladh na beatha, Ri linn bruchdadh na falluis, Ri linn iobar na creadha, Ri linn dortadh na fala.

The shadows continued to come forward, a wall of them four, six, eight feet tall until they filled the whole room and writhed high around the piano. Betty was buffeted from side to side as the piano rocked and threatened to fall.

Damnú ort! she shouted at the top of her voice.

A percussive blast blew through the room; a light so bright that she could still see it even when she pressed her eyes tightly closed. The rocking abated, and silence fell, her eyes slowly adjusting again to the dim light provided by the candles. Even before she could focus she heard him – George – running his hands across the piano keys in the old familiar song.

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.

Her legs went to jelly beneath her and she half-fell, half-stumbled to the piano stool, tears blinding her. Someone sat there. She reached out a hand.

George?

Cold flesh pressed against her, wet and clammy. She tasted brine as a wind whipped spray in her face and the wood of the piano creaked.

George?

A hand pressed against hers, then another, yet the pianist kept on playing.

The wind lashed into her face now and the floor beneath her buckled and swayed.

A ship in a storm; the wood remembers.

"George? Help me!" she shouted as more hands grabbed at her, dragging her inexorably towards where the open top of the piano waited like a gaping mouth.

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.

That was the last she heard before she was pulled completely off her feet. The piano lid closed with a clang.

Then all was quiet.

~-o0O0o-~

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